

# “IN ORDER FOR YOU TO LOVE SOMETHING, YOU NEED TO HAVE MEMORIES”:

## *Exploring Feelings of Being In and Out of Place in Vancouver, BC*

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**T**HIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON two gay-identified refugees’ narratives of place in Vancouver, British Columbia. Through oral histories and participatory photography provided by Mario and John,<sup>1</sup> I explore their experiences of feeling “in place” or “out of place” in the Vancouver cityscape, specifically the historic centre of Vancouver’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) communities known as Davie Village.<sup>2</sup> Vancouver and Davie Village sit on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh, Stó:lō, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. In this exploration I argue for the need to situate LGBTQ refugee experiences of belonging to spaces/places in the context of white settler colonialism and heteronormativity that not only shape queer migration in Vancouver but also implicitly inform queer mnemonic and affectual attachments to the cityscape. In the context of Vancouver, non-white LGBTQ refugees are settlers as well as racialized, classed, and sexualized Others. LGBTQ refugees navigate experiences of isolation and rejection in the physical and emotional space of feeling both belonging and not belonging. At the same time, LGBTQ refugees resist hegemonic settler and heteronormative narratives by creating spaces for themselves and their communities in Davie Village. By looking at all of these affectual and mnemonic attachments through LGBTQ refugees’ oral history and participatory photography, queer migration, and forced

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use the word “trans” instead of “transgender” in order to be inclusive of the various ways individuals interpret and express gender identity – ways that may reside outside of Western-based terminology and gender culture. Persons claiming in-state asylum based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity may call themselves gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, or transsexual on their basis-of-claim form. They may associate with and adopt these terms for their personal use. However, some who claim asylum may not personally associate themselves with these identity terms, especially in the ways that these are used in North America.

migration scholars can not only gain a deeper understanding of LGBTQ refugees' experiences outside of the legal immigration process but also integrate postcolonial and settler colonial critiques that connect migrant and immigration issues to the colonial context of space and place on settler-occupied land.

The article is structured around Mario's and John's voices and how they attach meaning to their experiences and the spaces around them. In doing so, it seeks to intersect forced migration research with a postcolonial queer narrative,<sup>3</sup> as well as with a phenomenological approach,<sup>4</sup> that emphasizes the lived experience of the active body and narration. Bodily sensations, emotion, and memory are all phenomena that Mario and John employ when, through their photographs and oral histories, they explore belonging. Mario's and John's experiences reveal how queer spaces in Canada are racially mapped and classed in the context of white settler colonialism and heteronormativity. I investigate the marginalization Mario's and John's experiences because of the racialized, classed, and sexualized norms in Davie Village as well as how they provide counter-narratives to these norms. In my exploration of their stories, I use postcolonial queer and critical queer theories that look at the intersections of race, gender, and class, which provide perspective on the possibilities and constraints that come from navigating places (i.e., Vancouver and Davie Village), here exemplified by Vancouver's legacy of settler colonialism and heteronormativity. I also employ queer and postcolonial narrative analysis that works to see how intersecting systems and discourses function to regulate queer non-white refugee bodies and affect their experiences of belonging and not belonging. In exploring oral history and photography, I analyze the role of queer memory and emotional attachment in creating a sense of space and place.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo Carham, "Mapping the Black Queer Geography of Johannesburg's Lesbian Women through Narrative," *Psychology in Society* 55 (2017): 84–86; Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, "What Makes Queer Oral History Different," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–24.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Chan and Laura Boyd Farmer, "Making the Case for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with LGBTGEQ+ Persons and Communities," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 11, no. 4 (2017): 285–300; Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543–74.

SITUATING THE RESEARCH: SETTLER COLONIALISM  
AND REFUGEE RELATIONSHIPS WITH SPACE/PLACE,  
QUEER MIGRATION, AND LGBTQ REFUGEES

*Connecting LGBTQ Forced Migration to Settler Colonialism in Canada*

Feelings of belonging as well as meanings attached to spaces are both situated within the particular embodied experiences of the individual as well as in the landscape they inhabit. Refugee experiences cannot be adequately theorized outside of spatialized relations of power that regulate race, sexuality, and gender.<sup>5</sup> As the Western hub for migration into and out of Canada, Vancouver and its surrounding cities (Burnaby, Langley, Surrey) serve as a critical nexus for refugee asylum and settlement,<sup>6</sup> with many incoming LGBTQ migrants claiming and being granted asylum in Canada on stolen and settler-occupied land. In looking at queer refugees in Canada, we see that white settler colonialism is omnipresent where the very systems refugees must navigate to gain asylum, as well as to settle, are supported by settler colonial institutions that have historically denied Indigenous sovereignty and that regulate migrants around gender, racial, and sexual lines. Migrants in British Columbia are able to claim asylum through the Canadian Refugee Board on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Skw̓w̓w̓mesh, Stó:lō, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Neither Band Councils or Indigenous Governments are involved in the decision making pertaining to immigration and asylum, and this speaks to the contradictory nature of settlement in Canada, which directly ignores First Nations sovereignty on their unceded lands. Refugees are settlers and are dependent upon Canada's settler colonial history and government for their ability to stay in this nation. At the same time, refugees and many other non-white immigrants have and continue to be historically regulated by Canada's predominate immigration policies, which discriminate among and regulate non-white incoming migrants. Refugees are depicted in the media and in political rhetoric as either benefactors of the nation or threatening intruders.<sup>7</sup> This creates a double meaning in which Canada can promote itself nationally and globally

<sup>5</sup> Sherene H. Razack, "When Place Becomes Race," in *Race and Racialization* 2nd ed., ed. T. Gupta, E. James, C. Andersen, G. Galabuzi, and R. Maaka (Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2018), 113–29.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Hyndman and James McLean, "Settling Like a State: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 349.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria M. Esses, Stelian Medianu, and Andrea S. Lawson, "Uncertainty, Threat, and the Role of the Media in Promoting the Dehumanization of Immigrants and Refugees," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 518–36.

as being welcoming and accepting while, at the same time, restricting refugees from the Global South and non-white majority countries.

Canada has a long history of regulating incoming migrants on the basis of gender, providing fewer opportunities to gain immigration status for women of colour and gender non-conforming individuals. One of the reasons for this is to support white hegemony and population majority, such as in the historical case of the *Chinese Immigration Act, 1885*, which aggressively discouraged Chinese women and children from entering the country.<sup>8</sup> Another reason speaks to the gendered nature of migration, in which gender inequality regarding access to financial, institutional, and social resources makes it more difficult for women and gender nonconforming individuals to migrate and to claim asylum.<sup>9</sup>

Sexuality continues to be regulated despite the fact that, since 1991, Canada has accepted asylum on the basis of sexual orientation. LGBTQ asylum seekers must not only prove their need for asylum but also prove that they are a member of a particular sexual orientation or are gender nonconforming. In other words, they must prove that they are in fact gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans. Nick Mule writes that, in the context of gender and sexual bias, as well due to a lack of cultural understanding of the diversity of sexuality/gender identity outside of the West, many asylum cases are denied.<sup>10</sup> This speaks to the underlying heteronormativity within Canada's immigration system,<sup>11</sup> which regulates asylum seekers who do not fit within the gender or sexual binary. LGBTQ asylum seekers entering Canada are viewed with suspicion as being "bogus claimants" or possible threats to the heteropatriarchal nation that reinforces heterosexuality and patriarchy.

By looking at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the context of white settler colonialism and heteronormativity, LGBTQ asylum seekers may experience discrimination not only as non-white immigrants but also for being sexual and gender minorities. From the very beginning, refugees like Mario and John must navigate intersecting

<sup>8</sup> Sunera Thobani, "Closing Ranks: Racism and Sexism in Canada's Immigration Policy," *Race and Class* 42, no. 1 (2000): 35–55; Trevor Gulliver, "Canada the Redeemer and Denials of Racism," *Critical Discourse Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 68–86.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Faust, "Cross-Border Migration and Social Inequalities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (2016): 323–46.

<sup>10</sup> Nick J Mulé, "Safe Haven Questioned: Proof of Identity over Persecution of SOGIE Asylum Seekers and Refugee Claimants in Canada," *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 1–17.

<sup>11</sup> Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the social norm or default sexuality. Heteronormativity is predicated upon the gender binary as well as the gender hierarchy that places cisgender straight men in privileged positions. Those who are not heterosexual or who do not fit within the gender binary are deemed to be inferior, threatening, or other.

systems of white settler colonialism and heteronormativity that, on the one hand, deny Indigenous sovereignty and, on the other, marginalize them for being queer and persons of colour. This experience continues long after having been granted asylum as the context of heteronormativity and white settler colonialism shapes the landscape of Vancouver.

### *Exploring LGBTQ Refugee Experiences of Belonging to Space/Place*

The exploration of refugees' relationships with particular spaces or places has a long history in forced migration research.<sup>12</sup> Researchers reveal how governmental structures, media, and national borders work to create a discourse around refugees as unsettled, transitional, or undesirable bodies out of place.<sup>13</sup> This can cause many refugees to feel conflicting attachments between their adopted country and their country of origin. Yet, within these constrictions, refugees work to create attachments to different places as they (re)create semblances of home.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore important to look at how refugees can feel a sense of not belonging to a particular place (feeling out of place) and, at the same time, feel connected and a sense of belonging to the same place (feeling in place).

Space refers to the physical locations and landscapes (buildings, streets) as well as to the geopolitical sites (cities, states) with which refugees interact in their daily lives.<sup>15</sup> These spaces include sites that refugees currently inhabit and physically engage with, but they can also be locations refugees have inhabited or passed through and/or to which they have strong social, emotional, material, or relational connections. Place refers to the emotional, social, and material meanings attributed to a particular space and individuals' connections to them.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Brun, "Reterritorializing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies," *Geografiska Annaler* 83, no. 1 (2001): 16–19; Robyn Sampson and Sandra M. Gifford, "Place-Making, Settlement and Well-Being: The Therapeutic Landscapes of Recently Arrived Youth with Refugee Backgrounds," *Health and Place* 16, no. 1 (2010): 116–20; Cheryl Sutherland, "Sense of Place amongst Immigrant and Refugee Women in Kingston and Peterborough, Ontario," in *Canadian Perspectives on Immigration in Small Cities*, ed. Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Julie L. Drolet (Switzerland: Springer International, 2017), 119–40.

<sup>13</sup> Ala Sirriyeh, "Home Journeys: Im/mobilities in Young Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Women's Negotiations of Home," *Childhood* 17, no. 2 (2010): 215; David Murray, *Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 137.

<sup>14</sup> Bernadette Rosbrook and Robert D. Schweitzer, "The Meaning of Home for Karen and Chin Refugees from Burma: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach," *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling* 12, no. 2 (2010): 159–72.

<sup>15</sup> Dorren Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Doreen Massey's analysis of space and place as being continuously constructed through social interactions and relations serves as the basis for my understanding of how LGBTQ refugees' relationships to space/place are changing, intersectional, and highly contested. Instead of providing a descriptive, static, and ahistorical analysis of space and place, Massey urges researchers to see space and place as always being "constituted through complex social interactions, power, and local/global contexts."<sup>17</sup> This calls for a relational sense of space and place in which both are constructed from the multiplicity of social relations.<sup>18</sup> Thinking of space and place in this way implies that they are open and porous. Individuals holding different positions in relation to a particular place experience and interpret the social relations to that place differently, and, as products of ever-changing relations, the meanings and identities attached to a place go beyond the particular area or space. Individuals and communities continuously constitute and contest the meanings and significances of place within local, national, and global contexts. The identities and meanings of place are unfixed and changing because the social relations out of which they are constructed are dynamic, mobile, and shifting.<sup>19</sup> There is no authenticity of place. Places are not timeless.<sup>20</sup> The past is not more fixed than the present. The identity of any place, including a place called home, is always open to contestation.<sup>21</sup> Place is therefore an active process constituted by people invested differently in relation to a particular space, each other, and other geographies.<sup>22</sup> Understanding what it means to be situated in a particular place and how refugees are attached and attach themselves affectively in the world allows researchers to interrogate refugee settlement beyond the confines of national boundaries.<sup>23</sup>

Research on place and forced migration is predominantly heteronormative as the majority of research being conducted is on heterosexual and cisgender individuals and families. Not only are queer refugees excluded from the conversation but so is interrogation around gender and sexual norms that regulate refugee bodies. However, within queer

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Brun, "Reterritorializing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies," 15.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Hwajoo Lee, "Metro Vancouver's Koreatown: Mediating Places of Belonging within the Politics of Multiculturalism" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Karyn Mesa Calvez, *Cultural Divide: A Neighbourhood Study of Immigrant Rental Housing in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Pivot Legal Society, 2008), 169.

<sup>22</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 141; Lee, "Metro Vancouver's Koreatown," 79.

<sup>23</sup> Louise Waite and Joanne Cook, "Belonging among Diasporic African Communities in the UK: Plurilocal Homes and Simultaneity of Place Attachments," *Emotion, Space and Society* 4, no. 4 (2011): 238–48.

migration studies, the body of research on racialized queer migrants has grown considerably. Martin Manalansan writes that racialized queer migrants face multiple cultural, political, and economic displacements that can cause them to feel out of place in the dominant host society. Racialized and queer migrants are marginalized in multiple ways. They not only face cultural, political, and economic displacements as newcomers but also confront another set of oppressive regimes in mainstream and gay communities.<sup>24</sup> David Murray's research on sexual and gender minority refugees' experiences of home and belonging in Canada reveals multiple and contradictory attachments to home. Although sexual and gender minority refugees are grateful for the opportunity to live safely in Canada without the threat of state and societal persecution, they do not necessarily feel completely accepted or at home in this country. LGBTQ refugees may experience dislocation in Canada on account of their ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender identity, and as newcomers in an unfamiliar place. At the same time, many LGBTQ refugees continue to maintain material ties and personal relationships with families and communities in their countries of origin. Murray argues for a fluid conception of home for LGBTQ refugees – a conception that allows for simultaneous and multiple connections to different homes across transnational fields.<sup>25</sup> Understanding how LGBTQ refugees talk about their experiences of place allows us not only to understand the social, structural, and material worlds they must navigate as they settle in Canada but also to explore the affective relationships that LGBTQ refugees create with particular places. Interrogating a specifically queer space, Davie Village, through the experiences of Mario and John provides the opportunity to deconstruct various racialized, classed, and gender discourses surrounding queerness and nationalism.

#### METHODOLOGY

The stories collected come from a 2012 to 2016 study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans refugees living in Vancouver, British Columbia. The research consisted of ethnography, oral history, and participatory photography, also known as photovoice. The ethnographic portion consisted of the knowledge gained from my three years of working as an asylum and settlement volunteer for Rainbow Refugee. Rainbow

<sup>24</sup> Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 185; Dai Kojima, "No Arrivals: The Cultural Politics of Mobilities in Queer Asian Diasporas in Canada" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Murray, *Real Queer*, 135–40.

Refugee is a non-profit organization based in Vancouver and dedicated to assisting those claiming asylum on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status. Twenty LGBTQ refugees participated in the oral history portion of the project. Of these, ten completed the photography or photovoice portion of the project. I wanted another opportunity for the participants to document and express their experiences of migration and settlement in Canada. The participants were given access to a camera and were responsible for deciding what photographs were produced and the meanings behind them. The only request I made was that the photographs speak to the participants' experiences of migration and settlement, especially with regard to their feelings or experiences around "home" and "belonging." The project was open to the participants in terms of how they wanted to frame "home" and capture it in their pictures. Later, we met to talk about the pictures in detail and the meanings attached to them.

Both Mario's and John's experiences of migration and settlement are unique and should not be seen as representing all sexual minority refugees' experiences. Like all incoming asylum seekers, they came with their own privileges and specific social locations. While there are limitations to focusing on two individuals' stories, there is value in it. Examining their stories provides an opportunity to place their voices at the centre of inquiry and critique. This article takes a queer phenomenological approach that assesses the particular experiences of John and Mario and their relationship to space in order to critique larger structures of power and hegemonic norms. It is therefore structured around their narratives. The first section focuses on their experiences of marginalization in Davie Village. Because they were queer, non-white refugees, both Mario and John felt isolated and as though they did not belong. This leads into the next section, which addresses the ways in which they made space for themselves and developed a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is very much attached to the mnemonic, affectual, and social relationships they developed with the landscape and various communities in which they found themselves. I then suggest that this exploration be subjected to further questions and research.





Figure 1. Day of the Dead dolls. Photo by Mario, 2013.

FEELING OUT OF PLACE:  
EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION AND  
OBJECTIFICATION IN DAVIE VILLAGE

The above photograph (Figure 1) comes from Mario's preparations for a Día de Muertos, or "Day of the Dead," queer Latinx party he hosted at a popular gay bar in Davie Village in the fall of 2013. These dolls hold a special place in Mario's house, where he tries to retain aspects of his culture and country of origin. When asked about the picture and his experience of creating a home for himself in Vancouver, Mario reflected on how it took him a long time to fall in love with the city.

**Mario:** It took a long time to fall in love with this city. But, yeah! I remember when I finally fell in love with Vancouver. And it was amazing. It was like being in love – it was like falling in love with somebody. It's the same. And when that happened, I felt really safe. I mean, I feel relieved, convinced that I want to be here, so that was important for me ... to have that attachment to the city.

It doesn't matter where you are, if you don't have that attachment to where you are, then you are lost, you know? So for me, that was, that was a, like, oh, "I'm a winner now!" Like, I win having the feeling of love in the city. So that was what I needed.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mario, interview with author, 20 August 2013.

Mario said that if he were to write a book about his life, the title would be “Two Lives in One,” referring to the push-and-pull he experiences as a gay refugee from Central America who has lived in Vancouver for more than ten years. This push-and-pull refers to the shifting relationship Mario maintains in order to keep and uphold his culture and language while, at the same time, adapting and feeling a sense of belonging to his new home in Vancouver. “Two Lives in One” also refers to Mario’s life building a Latinx community in Davie Village. He organizes and hosts queer Latinx-themed parties at popular gay bars in Davie Village, and he sees this as a form of activism in that he is carving out space for Latinx people in the predominantly white queer scene here. He also works to create a visible online presence for LGBTQ Latinx in Metro Vancouver. This has resulted in the creation of a Facebook page, queer Latinx pride events, and a popular queer Hispanic and Latinx party scene.

Before being forced to migrate to Canada, Mario was an LGBTQ rights activist in his home country. His activism eventually saw him targeted by the police, so he left the country out of fear for his safety. He conducted online research on how to get asylum on the basis of sexual orientation, and, because of its laws protecting sexual and gender minorities (including legal same-sex marriage), he decided to make an asylum claim in Canada. In his thinking about his experience back then, Mario reflects how much he has grown.

**Mario:** It is a good memory for me, the first time that I went out to a gay bar. It was on Davie Street. I could not speak English. Guys were talking to me and I did not know what they were saying.

With that memory, I can see how much I grow, how much I changed, and what I have done. It makes me proud. That was when I first met Spanish people here. There were not too many. But I met two guys there. And they said to call them, and that’s how it [I] started to get to know everything. The first night that I went to a nightclub, it was the second night I arrived here.<sup>27</sup>

Mario described his encounters with gay men at the time of his arrival in Vancouver as relatively few and mostly involving white men as the bars catered to a mostly white and middle-class male clientele. It was hard for Mario to make friends in these places as a newly arrived immigrant. He felt othered because he was Latino and could not speak English. He missed the community of activists and friends he had in his country, and

<sup>27</sup> Mario, interview with author, 20 August 2013.

he missed dancing to Latinx music, being politically active, speaking Spanish, and participating in cultural traditions and holidays.

The experience of being othered in the predominantly white and middle-class gay community of Davie Village continued for Mario long after he learned English and became a Canadian citizen.

**Mario:** I don't experience as much as other people do. But, yeah, there are rude people. At the gay bars, I have heard or have heard from friends, some of the guys say to them, "Go back to your country." Or not racist things, but things where they don't want you to feel welcome. You just get the feeling.

One time ... this was more recent, but one time, I had somebody harassing me and following me all the time in the club. He was a white guy. I tried to be nice. I say, "You know what, leave me alone."

And then that person keeps following me, so I had to tell the manager. I don't want to talk with him. I'm talking with my friends and he's interrupting me. He becomes really angry verbally.

And then that guy, you know, he starts to tell me, "Show me your passport and show me this and show me that!"

And I was just laughing. He says, "Oh, I'll send you back to your country."

I was like, you know what, I have my Canadian passport. I have Canadian citizenship. It was kind of funny for me that some people when they don't know anything, they are generalizing.

They think, "Oh, nobody has documents here," or "The Latino doesn't have documents." And I'm like "No, no, no!" I didn't take it, like, too deep. I was not surprised when it happened. I laughed at the guy.<sup>28</sup>

Mario's experience shows that queer spaces are not devoid of racism.<sup>29</sup> Recently, geographers of sexuality and space have urged researchers to go beyond sexual exceptionalism, which defines a certain place as being simply gay or queer. Instead of solidifying and universalizing the idea of space as heterosexual or homosexual, these researchers suggest that sexuality should be seen as part of a set of broad constellations

<sup>28</sup> Mario, interview with author, 20 August 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Sonali Patel, "'Brown Girls Can't Be Gay': Racism Experienced by Queer South Asian Women in the Toronto LGBTQ Community," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2019): 1-14.

of power embedded in the particular history of the location.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly important in terms of race, gender, and class. According to Scott Morgensen,<sup>31</sup> Sonali Patel,<sup>32</sup> and Umut Erel et al.,<sup>33</sup> queer politics in Canada have either ignored or erased ongoing inequalities and differences in terms of race and class, which, in turn, allows for the marginalization of racialized, Indigenous, and low-income queer persons outside of mainstream gay communities and spaces. Race and class are conflated so that only issues affecting white, middle-class men are viewed as “proper” gay subjects.<sup>34</sup> Those outside this narrow perimeter of gay subjectivity are cast aside, erased, or deported.<sup>35</sup> Within popular gay spaces in Davie Village, whiteness, citizenship, and class are maintained through the active exclusion of those who are Indigenous, non-white, immigrant, and lower income. These exclusions range from the high cost of cover charges and drinks to advertisements that strictly cater to an upper-middle-class gay white clientele, the bouncers at the door, and the music played at the clubs. White gay male patrons of gay clubs also work to make sure those who are unwelcome stay unwelcome. They do this through racist remarks, looks, and refusing to interact with individuals whom they feel do not belong.

Mario’s experiences of racism are not isolated. Many other non-white gay refugees have expressed to me their feelings that they did not belong in the Davie Village gay social scene. John experienced similar discrimination. His experience speaks to how he was marginalized by the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality surrounding Davie Village.

**John:** So these two pictures (Figure 2) represents a contrast from what I thought my life would be. The first is a picture of a waterfall, like abundance and freedom. Flowing and able to move freely. Fresh and clean. Very beautiful. [laughs] And then there’s the dumpster. These

<sup>30</sup> Natalie Oswin, “Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 32, no. 1 (2008): 89–103.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Patel, “Brown Girls Can’t Be Gay.”

<sup>33</sup> Umut Erel, Jin Haritaworn, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, and Christian Klesse, “On the Depoliticisation of Intersectionality Talk: Conceptualising Multiple Oppressions in Critical Sexuality Studies,” in *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*, ed. Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines, and Mark Casey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 56–77.

<sup>34</sup> Cameron Greensmith and Sulaimon Giwa, “Challenging Settler Colonialism in Contemporary Queer Politics: Settler Homonationalism, Pride Toronto, and Two-Spirit Subjectivities,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 129–48.

<sup>35</sup> Karma R. Chávez, “Border (In)Securities: Normative and Differential Belonging in LGBTQ and Immigrant Rights Discourse,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 136–55.



Figure 2. Image of running water in a stream (left) and image of a dumpster behind Davie Village (right). Photos by John, 2014.

dumpsters are actually behind Davie Street. I wanted to take a picture of them. I say that when I look at Canada, especially Vancouver, there's like the front face and in the back alley is the dumpster. The dumpster, the back alley dumpster, is my vision of Vancouver. That's where I am forced to go.

So, as a gay man, as a refugee, and, of course, as an Asian, as a single guy, I don't have family here, you know ... I have to work four times or even five times as hard to get to where I want to be as an ordinary Canadian. You know?

Because I am not entitled to all the rights I have. I am a visible minority and I am gay. I'm also older and not rich ... which is, you know, terrible in the gay community. [Laughs] A friend told me that it's like a death sentence. You know? Being poor, Asian, old, and gay ...

So I won't have any place in this society. Especially because this society is a very unforgiving society. That's why as a refugee here I can only say that my life is not any better from where I came from. It's just that it is a different ... I would say that it is a different experience, that's all. And then plus my sexual orientation, not being young or rich, makes it even harder for me to excel. You know, to move on with my life.

I don't really just face the straight people; I also face my own gay community. People in the gay community, they are also quite mean and nasty.<sup>36</sup>

John described himself as a man who “struggled for most of his life because of being gay.”<sup>37</sup> In 2011, the police in John's country of origin targeted him after his neighbours publicly outed him as gay. He heard from his gay friends that the police would detain and extort gay men for money. John was afraid that he would be arrested and sent to prison any day. He saved up money for a vacation, deciding that it would be a good idea for him to “get away from the police for a little while.”<sup>38</sup> John found a cheap flight package to Vancouver through a local travel agent, checked out a gay travel website, and learned about Davie Village. John thought that Vancouver would be a good place to relax and enjoy life as a gay man. Once he arrived in Vancouver, he connected with Rainbow Refugee and decided to claim asylum.

John's explanation of the meaning behind the waterfall and dumpster pictures speaks to the marginalization he experienced in Vancouver as a low-income gay East Asian refugee. There is a good reason John is so specific about the dumpster's location behind Davie Street. Davie Village was the first place that John lived when he made his refugee claim. It was also an area where he experienced social rejection, and this affected his sense of home and belonging within Vancouver's larger gay community.

When John made a refugee claim, he decided to live in Davie Village because he wanted to be near the close-knit gay community living in the area. The cost of rent in Davie Village was high: more than twice that of an apartment on the periphery of Vancouver or in the surrounding suburbs. At first, John had difficulty obtaining an apartment. He answered “roommate wanted” advertisements posted online, only to find that the advertisers did not want to share an apartment with him because he was a refugee and unemployed. John described seeing

<sup>36</sup> John, interview with author, 20 April 2014.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 June 2013.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

several roommate ads saying “No Asians.” He was not able to rent an apartment on his own because he did not have credit and could not pass a mandatory credit check. He eventually learned from other gay Asian immigrants that some of the larger property managers in the West End take advance cash payments in lieu of credit. John was able to get a small studio apartment by paying three months’ rent in advance.

John’s apartment was in a building managed by Hollyburn, a multi-million-dollar property investment and development company in British Columbia. As the area underwent rapid renovations in the aftermath of the 2010 Winter Olympics, Hollyburn and other development agencies faced growing criticism from gay activists and locals for gentrifying the neighbourhood and displacing inhabitants of the West End. Older and cheaper independently owned apartment buildings in the West End were being demolished and replaced by more expensive high-rise condos and apartments. Many of the older gay inhabitants were forced to relocate as they lost their housing and could not afford the higher rents. Coming in to replace these people was a mixture of upper-middle-class professionals and affluent immigrants.

The changing landscape in the West End led to discussions in both gay-oriented and mainstream newspapers about the loss of housing and community. Although gay men remained a significant population in the West End, the influx of upper-middle-class professionals caused concern over the potential loss of Vancouver’s historic gay district. However, much of the media’s attention was directed towards investment and housing purchases on the part of immigrants from Asia. Several papers ran cover stories with titles like “Saving Davie Village,” “Destroying West End Housing,” and “There Goes the Gayborhood.”<sup>39</sup> Incoming immigrants from Asia were visible targets for local anxiety about rising housing prices and the higher cost of living in downtown Vancouver.<sup>40</sup>

John experienced racist comments and “dirty looks” from neighbours in his building. When he told other gay men where he lived, he received criticism for renting from Hollyburn, which they saw as an enemy to the local gay community in Davie Village. He was also objectified as a threat to the gay history and culture of Davie Village.

<sup>39</sup> Vincent Miller, “Intertextuality, the Referential Illusion and the Production of a Gay Ghetto,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 1 (2005): 61–79; David Ley and Cory Dobson, “Are There Limits to Gentrification? The Contexts of Impeded Gentrification in Vancouver,” *Urban Studies* 45, no. 12 (2008): 2471–498; David Zomparelli, *Vancouver Daily Xtra*, 16 June 2010; David Shanks, *Vancouver WestEnder*, 6 March 2008; Yvonne Zacharias and Bethany Lindsay, *Vancouver Sun*, 29 July 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, “Intertextuality,” 2005.

**John:** When I moved here, I didn't know anything. Nothing about the history ... you know, about what's going on here with Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean people buying up homes. I learned pretty fast. First time it happened was when I got my apartment. One of my neighbours always gave me a mean look. I was always polite and smiled, but never did he smile back. Always a nasty look. I asked another neighbour about this and he said, "Well, he doesn't like you because you are Asian." And that's all the reason he needed.

But, it wasn't just the neighbours! I know that a lot of people hate Hollyburn. They always say bad things about them. When I first met people, I told them where I lived. They criticize me so much about Hollyburn. But then I told them I don't have any other choice. I don't know where else to stay. I don't know where to find my resources. And I don't know anyone here and I am all by myself. And they get angry with me for renting a Hollyburn property.

They say Hollyburn is letting people take away Davie Street ... that Hollyburn is not doing a proper job in the gay community in the West End. They say they jack up the rent so much. That they are squishing out the gay people from the West End. They are a culprit ... but then they also say that the government is also a culprit. The government allows them to do all these things.

And plus YOU people also. YOU people, which is me, but really, they mean Asian. You are renting from them also. You also contribute to the disaster of the West End. You are hurting the gay community here. Then I say, "Look, how do you expect me to know all these things within two weeks of my arrival?"<sup>41</sup>

Sara Ahmed writes that race and colonial historical legacies work together to render dispersed strangers and their irreducible differences into a singular figure that can be easily objectified.<sup>42</sup> John felt that the gay men he encountered had already "made their decision about him" based on his ethnicity, age, income, and immigration status. This assumed knowledge felt both pervasive and inescapable: it rendered John not an individual but an outsider.<sup>43</sup> The reaction John received as an Asian immigrant speaks to the history of white settler homonormativity underlying settlement

<sup>41</sup> John, interview with author, 17 August 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).





Figure 3. Screenshot of Davie Village Street taken by John as part of his photo submission, 2014.

and sexual politics in Vancouver. Jasbir Puar writes that sexual exceptionalism in Western gay politics works on the framework of whiteness, which makes white bodies the norm for queerness.<sup>44</sup> Scott Morgensen expands on Puar's argument and argues that sexual exceptionalism rests on white settler colonialism, which denies Indigenous sovereignty and disregards racialized queers as outside of gay politics and spaces. White settler homonormativity reproduces white settler privilege and normalizes patriarchal and cisnormative heterosexual practices such as marriage, patriarchy, and the gender binary. The gay sexual citizen is a white settler who holds inherent privilege and entitlement due to his/her membership in the settler state. Those outside of this confining white settler gay norm are seen as other or threats, regardless of whether they are sexual minorities.<sup>45</sup>

Davie Village originally developed as a gay-designated commercial and community space when low-income persons, non-European immigrants, and sex workers were pushed out of Vancouver's West End.<sup>46</sup> By the 1960s, city officials had forcibly removed most of the Urban Indigenous communities settlements in the West End.<sup>47</sup> The space left behind allowed the development of cheap housing and the creation of Stanley Park. Becki Ross writes that the availability of cheap single-occupant apartments and large outdoor spaces in the West End turned it into an area of sexual liberalism in which individuals engaging in public sex could meet discreetly.<sup>48</sup> The sexual liberalism allowed for more and more gay men to move into the area and build a community. The gay men in these communities were mostly white and Canadian-born as Urban Indigenous communities had long ago been forced out of the area, and immigration policies strictly limited migration on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality until the late 1970s.

Gay-oriented and gay-owned bars and shops appeared as more gay men moved into the area. Eventually, the West End became the most visible place for the gay community in Vancouver. In 1975, the Gay/Police

<sup>44</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Queer Settler Colonialism in Canada and Israel: Articulating Two-Spirit and Palestinian Queer Critiques," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 167–90.

<sup>46</sup> Becki Ross, "Sex and (Evacuation from) the City: The Moral and Legal Regulation of Sex Workers in Vancouver's West End, 1975–1985," *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 197–218; Becki Ross, "Outdoor Brothel Culture: The Un/making of a Transsexual Stroll in Vancouver's West End, 1975–1984," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25, 1 (2012): 126–50; John Paul Catungal and Eugene J. McCann, "Governing Sexuality and Park Space: Acts of Regulation in Vancouver, BC," *Social and Cultural Geography* 11, no. 1 (2010): 75–94.

<sup>47</sup> Catungal and McCann, "Governing Sexuality."

<sup>48</sup> Ross, "Sex and (Evacuation from) the City."

Liaison Committee was formed to enable citizens to work with the police to stop police violence against the West End's gay inhabitants. Gay activists pressured city officials to remove sex workers from the area in an effort to "clean up" the West End and create a level of respectability. In turn, housing prices rose, forcing many inhabitants to leave the area. These persons included lesbians, transpersons, and a long-established Chinese community. By the early 1980s, the predominantly white, middle-class gay men in the West End had achieved political gravity and economic stability.<sup>49</sup> Davie Village transformed from a sexually liberal and multicultural location to a mostly white, middle-class area defined by a particular sexual identity (homosexual) and gender (cisgender male).

The underlying racial, gendered, classed, and sexualized settler history of Davie Village contributed to John's experience of marginalization. John is not silent about what he sees as the injustice directed towards him and other Asian immigrants. As he explains, the media depiction of Asian immigration as being the root cause of Vancouver's housing crisis is misleading and ahistorical. John was able to travel to Canada, make a refugee claim, and get an apartment in Davie Village because of the long history of communications, trade, and travel between Asia and Canada. His migration and settlement is not exceptional in the context of the larger history of immigration and globalization. Yet he was marked as a stranger and outsider because of ongoing colonial and Orientalist discourses around Asian immigration in Vancouver.<sup>50</sup>

The phrase "YOU people" stripped John of his individuality and placed him within a racial discourse that situates visible minorities, particularly those from Asia, as challengers to underlying white settler hegemony in Vancouver. Sherene Razack,<sup>51</sup> Sunera Thobani,<sup>52</sup> and Himani Bannerji write that political and social discourse in Canada and the United States works to define and naturalize the idea of a uniform cultural community and national border based on an "inherent" or "natural" white majority.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Richard Borbridge, "Sexuality and the City: Exploring Gaybourhoods and the Urban Village Form in Vancouver, BC," MCP, University of Manitoba, 2007. <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/bitstream/handle/1993/2973/ThesisMSpacemed.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; Becki Ross and Rachael Sullivan, "Tracing Lines of Horizontal Hostility: How Sex Workers and Gay Activists Battled for Space, Voice, and Belonging in Vancouver, 1975–1985," *Sexualities* 15, nos. 5–6 (2012): 604–21.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Sherene Razack, *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000).

This discourse ignores the ways in which constant migration back and forth between the Eastern and Western parts of the world shaped the social, economic, and political landscape of North America. This is especially true for migration between Asia and Canada's West Coast.<sup>54</sup> Migration to and from East and South Asia shaped the Vancouver landscape and created interlocking networks of social and economic exchanges across the Pacific. This relationship allowed Vancouver to grow into a large urban centre as foreign money was invested in the region. Without this relationship, Vancouver's industry and housing market would collapse. Blaming immigrants and investors from Asia for being the primary cause of Vancouver's housing crisis ignores the immigration policies and neoliberal market practices put in place by the Canadian federal government, British Columbia's provincial government, and Vancouver's municipal government, all of which actively recruit and foster foreign investment and immigration. What is in fact a discussion about class and capitalism as they relate to housing and investment in Vancouver becomes a discussion about race in which Asian immigrants are visible targets for white settler social anxiety.<sup>55</sup>

It is not enough to say that John and Mario encountered racism within the gay community in Davie Village: they did. But stopping there ignores the fact that Davie Village was a racialized settler-occupied place from the outset. John's and Mario's experiences reveal the underlying white settler hegemony surrounding queer spaces in Vancouver. While it is important to recognize and understand John's and Mario's feelings of alienation and isolation, it is also critical that I, as a listener and interpreter of their stories, do not place them in a flattened narrative, viewing them as only marginalized victims. In the next section I focus on narratives of resistance and creativity, through which both Mario and John provide counter-narratives to whiteness, settler colonialism, and heteronormativity.

<sup>54</sup> Sin Yih Teo, "Vancouver's Newest Chinese Diaspora: Settlers or 'Immigrant Prisoners?'," *GeoJournal* 68, nos. 2-3 (2007): 211-22; Dai Kojima, "Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities-in-Difference and Basue Tactics in Queer Asian Diasporas," *Anthropologica* 56, no. 1 (2014): 33-44.

<sup>55</sup> Dan Cui and Jennifer Kelly, "'Too Asian?' or the Invisible Citizen on the Other Side of the Nation?," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 14, no. 1 (2013): 157-74; Laura Madokoro, "Chinatown and Monster Homes: The Splintered Chinese Diaspora in Vancouver," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* 39, no. 2 (2011): 17-24.

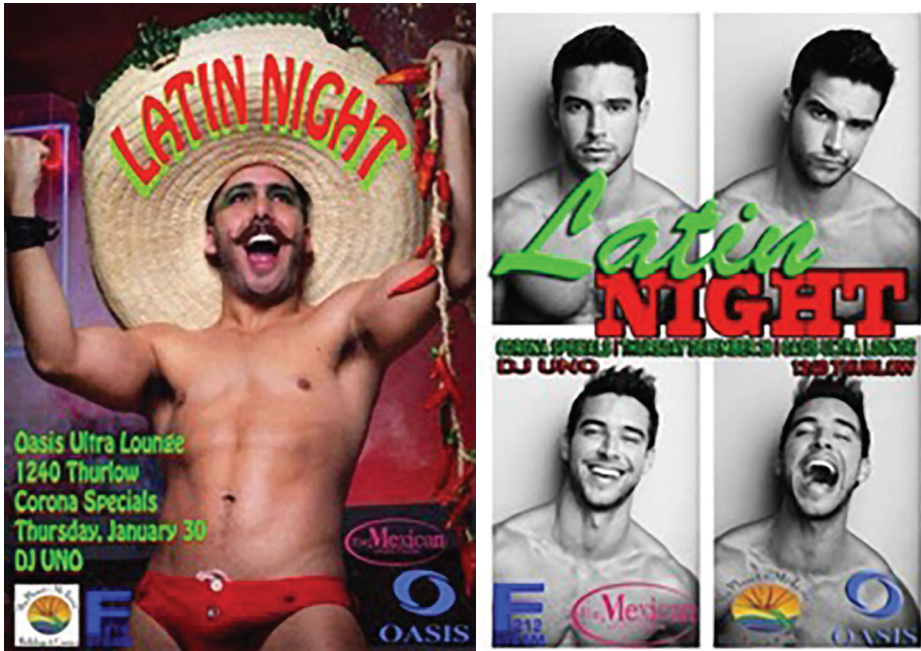


Figure 4. Two advertisements for Latin Night created by Mario.

#### FEELING IN PLACE: COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF PLACE-MAKING, MEMORY, AND RESISTANCE

**Mario:** People really responded very well to the first night. I was happy to have another option. I am happy that you can hear different music in Vancouver. So that's what Vancouver is all about: multiculturalism. There are so many different cultures here, but you need to see it. Pushing things so that we can have everything in Vancouver – to experience everything in Vancouver, not just one type of music. Pushing for more variety.

The parties got more and more popular. We were the only club at the time who had Hispanic music. And we found out that there are a lot of Canadian people who like it. They go often to Central America and to Mexico and they like the Latin nights. I told them that you don't have to pay too much to enjoy Hispanic music in Vancouver. You don't have to go all the way down [to] Puerto Vallarta to see the culture. The culture lives here, too. There is a gay Latin community here, too. We exist, you know?<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Mario, interview with author, 20 August 2013.

The first gay Latinx dance night at a Vancouver gay club took place in 2005, when a well-known Vancouver drag queen hosted a Cinco de Mayo party at a club in Davie Village. Mario attended the second night of the club's Latinx-themed party and found the venue almost empty. Mario told the DJ that he could bring in some popular current Latinx music. The DJ referred Mario to the club manager, who then asked him to DJ for another gay Latinx dance night. Mario's first party was a success, with a large number of people attending and responding positively to the music.

After the success of the Mario's first Latin Night, he quickly began to take more control of the once-a-month gay Latinx parties. The lure of Latinx music and the promise of meeting other queer Spanish speakers encouraged many LGBTQ Hispanic and Latinx Americans to come to Davie Village, a space that previously felt off limits to them. Mario realized that the Latin Nights addressed a vital need in the queer Latinx community. He created a Facebook page for the Latinx LGBTQ community in Vancouver and has now been organizing queer and gay Latin Nights at popular gay bars in Davie Village for almost ten years.

**Mario:** I sometimes get emails from couples all over the world. You know, asking me about Vancouver. Spanish-speaking people. They tell me that they are going to visit Vancouver. They ask how the gay community is here. Some have asked about refuge. They tell me about the problems they are experiencing. I've been really happy helping others abroad and helping to start a community here. It's like I connect both of my lives together: my life in [Central America] and my life here ...

The parties and the Facebook are all about celebrating who we are. But it's also about community, care, support. You know, I'm an activist. Even though these are parties, they may not look like they do that much ... but they are important, too. We may not be, like, shaking our fists, but we also support our community and others. We all need to dance. That's important, too. We need to be happy. The Facebook works to bring people together, so that we are not alone.<sup>57</sup>

The queer Latinx parties and Facebook page allow Mario to remap the Davie Village gay social scene to celebrate and make visible the presence of LGBTQ Hispanics and Latinx. By framing the parties and the Facebook page as a celebration of queer Hispanic and Latinx culture and mechanisms for community building in Vancouver, Mario

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

challenges the whiteness and xenophobia surrounding Davie Village. Mario's statement that the gay Latinx parties and Facebook group are political offers a different way to name political acts. Experiencing and celebrating joy in one's life is a political act. Dancing can be an act of resistance. Bringing people together through the gay Latinx parties and the Facebook group fosters community empowerment, which leads to a sense of belonging in Vancouver. They prevent queer Latinx lives from being erased from public consciousness, especially within the larger gay community surrounding Davie Village. Preventing this erasure and providing opportunities for LGBTQ Latinx to connect works to empower Vancouver's queer Latinx community. This is a strong testament to the creativity, vitality, and tenacity of marginalized queer migrant communities in Vancouver.

**Mario:** So, at the beginning, it was hard. I was missing my life and my memories of home. I was terribly homesick. I was missing my culture and everything. I gave up, and I said, okay – I am not going to suffer anymore. I am not going to keep reliving the memories of my country and not realize the memories that I am making in this country ...

In order for you to love something, you need to have memories. If you don't have any memories, then you don't enjoy what you are doing. That's why the first years are hard for many people here to fall in love with the city. You feel so alone. You don't feel a part of the city. You can't make memories. I am not speaking for everybody, but I am just speaking for people and myself who have had the same experience.

So, for me, when I finally fell in love with Canada, it was when I finally had memories of Vancouver. I have memories now of the many streets in the city. Many places around the city, like Davie Street. I now have memories of those places and what those places were before. The city is always changing. I have memories of those changes. One day they tear something down and they make something new. It's neat for me now to walk by somewhere and say, "Oh, that used to be a coffee shop; now it is a hotel. That used to be a gas station and now they are building a huge apartment storey there." I can be there and witness it. I can say to people that I remember those places.

I can do that now. I can remember that. It really is wonderful. I don't know – it's strange to recognize that attachment to the city.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Mario's thoughtful discussion of the importance of memory to his feelings of belonging suggests that there is a deeper dynamic at work than just familiarity with his local environment. Memory plays a significant role in working out how one might belong in a new place and transcend feelings of strangeness and longing for places left behind.<sup>59</sup> A strange space becomes a place when it feels familiar to us through our affective attachments.<sup>60</sup> Qazi Azizul Mowla argues that our histories and identities are interwoven with spaces and places through our personal memory-tagging:<sup>61</sup> "We attribute to places a personal memory-tagging which marks them in our mind. In this way we might say that we need to remember in order to have an identity and sense of place."<sup>62</sup> This memory-tagging happens through our everyday interactions with the site and the relations we create, maintain, and transform with people and places left behind and the new people and places we encounter.<sup>63</sup> The queer Latinx parties and Facebook page allow Mario to join different parts of his identity and his sense of self to the Vancouver cityscape. Mario can feel connected to the city and to Davie Village through the memories he makes. They allow him to live "two lives in one," as he can celebrate his culture and identity as a gay Latino in Vancouver. The parties and Facebook page also provide him the opportunity to insert himself and the Latinx queer community into the social history of Vancouver. Their visible presence leaves a mark on the landscape and provides a counter-narrative against erasure.

The counter-narratives produced by John's story and photographs also show resistance.

**John:** This picture (Figure 5) represents two things. So you asked me if there were places I felt excluded. I wouldn't say just Davie Street. I would say rather the whole [of] Vancouver itself, you know. So this WHOLE picture.

But also, this image is really common on tourist sites. It was an image that I saw before I came here. So I guess this image is like two meanings, or a double meaning. Because I saw this image when I was

<sup>59</sup> Clare Rishbeth and Mark Powell, "Place Attachment and Memory: Landscapes of Belonging as Experienced Post-Migration," *Landscape Research* 38, no. 2 (2013): 160–78; David Ralph and Lynn A. Stachel, "Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities," *Geography Compass* 5, no. 7 (2011): 517–30; Qazi Azizul Mowla, "Memory Association in Place Making: Understanding an Urban Space," *Memory* 9 (2004): 52–54.

<sup>60</sup> Mowla, "Memory," 53.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.





Figure 5. Screenshot of Vancouver skyline taken by John as part of his photo submission, 2014.

planning my vacation. And I thought Vancouver would be so many things. But I see now that it is just a picture.

In some ways, Vancouver does give me refuge, but the hate part is there. It doesn't have much true opportunity here. You know, when I say true opportunity, it means an opportunity that you can do things that are meaningful. You can live well. You can build a life. Yeah, I find that there's not much opportunity here.

I just do whatever I can for now and then make my final decision. I might return to [a country in East Asia]. Maybe I am just too tired. I can't see much of my future here. I just see the next day. Maybe I might still go somewhere. Who knows? Maybe it might get better? Maybe not. I'm trying to figure out my direction.

You know, it's like I told you the first time. I am still waiting for my ship to come. Still waiting for my ship. So I just keep looking for my ship.<sup>64</sup>

John's experiences of objectification and not fitting into the social fabric of Davie Village speak to how dislocation and displacement figure differently depending on national spaces and historical periods.<sup>65</sup> Sara Ahmed<sup>66</sup> and Beverly Skeggs<sup>67</sup> note that being able to belong, to move, and to control one's ability to locate oneself in the landscape both "reflect[s] and reinforce[s] power."<sup>68</sup> John's pictures and story speak to an inequality of mobility in which "not everyone has an equal relationship."<sup>69</sup> John's experience of marginalization in Davie Village due to his social positioning as a gay Asian refugee speaks to how displacement can be situated within specific spaces through the collision of colonial histories – a collision that attaches racial histories to place. John navigates conflicting relationships as he continues to get by. His sense of place is in the lived tension he continues to experience through his marginalization and dislocation in Vancouver.

Sara Ahmed writes that we live in a time when "the promise of happiness" structures and regulates our lives.<sup>70</sup> Multiculturalism and immigration underline this promise in the West. The image of the "happy citizen" is contrasted with the image of "the melancholy migrant."<sup>71</sup> Media portrayals of immigrants becoming happy citizens or "good immigrants" by adopting national customs and being productive members of society serve to perpetuate the idea that happiness can be achieved if one works hard for it. This covers up the ongoing inequality and hierarchical power structures that, on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, and/or class, prevent individuals from achieving such happiness.<sup>72</sup> John's pictures and story are an act of resistance to his marginalization. In showing the contrast between what he thought Canada would be like and what he experienced, he is directing the gaze back to the audience. He resists his objectification and provides a counter-narrative to the underlying assumptions that determine who belongs and who does not

<sup>64</sup> John, interview with author, 20 April 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006): 210.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.

<sup>67</sup> Beverly Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>70</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

belong in the Vancouver landscape. In “waiting for [his] ship to come,” John must negotiate multiple dislocations. Although he has been a victim of racism, he refuses to be objectified and homogenized. John’s pictures and analysis of the discourses surrounding housing and settlement in the West End provide a counter-narrative to historical whitewashing and racialized homonormativity. His experience speaks directly to the effects of whiteness and nationalism on racialized queer immigrants. He feels that he was pushed to the alley, to the outside of the Davie Village gay community – and, in fact, he left the community to seek a sense of home elsewhere in Vancouver. His day-to-day negotiations of survival show his ongoing resilience in the face of displacement.<sup>73</sup>

#### IN AND OUT OF PLACE: CONCLUDING REMARKS

In exploring Mario’s and John’s stories, we are provided with an opportunity to examine both their embodied experiences and the landscapes they inhabit as they navigate conflicting spaces and places of belonging and of not belonging. The stories and photographs created by Mario and John provide a brief snapshot of their lives as gay refugees living in Vancouver. These narratives and photographs are unique to their experiences, yet they also speak to the larger structures of inequality surrounding queer and non-white refugee settlement in Canada. The particular political, economic, and settler history of Vancouver – and, in particular, of Davie Village – has created a system in which sexualized, classed, and racial hierarchies inform LGBTQ refugees’ migration and settlement. LGBTQ refugees experience economic and social inequality in Vancouver that can leave them feeling marginalized and/or unwelcome. Queer spaces may not offer the protection and sense of community that is so desired for incoming LGBTQ refugees. For John and Mario, Davie Village was a hostile place in which they felt objectified and targeted as threats to the white settler heteronormativity and homonormativity that encapsulates queer as well as non-queer designated spaces in Canada. It is therefore important to bring a critical perspective to spaces/places and to interrogate how histories of white settler colonialism and heteronormativity work to render certain bodies “out of place.”

In my article “Queer Settlers: Questioning Settler Colonialism in LGBT Asylum Processes in Canada,”<sup>74</sup> I question what it means to

<sup>73</sup> Manalansan, *Global Divas*.

<sup>74</sup> Katherine Fobear, “Queer Settlers: Questioning Settler Colonialism in LGBT Asylum Processes in Canada,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 30, no. 1 (2014): 47–56.

claim asylum on unceded First Nations lands and urge forced migration researchers to connect more intently with Indigenous issues. Harsha Walia writes that decolonization can only be possible when the immigrant and refugee rights movement is rearticulated as a struggle against settler colonialism.<sup>75</sup> One step in this direction involves not addressing refugee and immigration in settler states as a separate issue from Indigenous sovereignty. Anti-immigration xenophobia, white privilege, and histories of settler colonialism reinforce hierarchies that disenfranchise and marginalize refugees, persons of colour, and Indigenous people. Settler colonialism depends exclusively on concepts of control, ownership of land, and reinforced borders. In these power structures, both incoming refugees and Indigenous people experience violence and marginalization. The struggle for Indigenous sovereignty is not the same as the struggles against marginalization that refugees may face, but both share the underlying root of settler colonialism, and this can provide an avenue for connection and coalition. This may be challenging as conversations around immigration, even those concerning the experiences that refugees share, may not directly address Indigenous issues. It may be difficult to make the underlying connections between forced migration experiences and Indigenous experiences in Canada. Although neither Mario nor John talked directly about settler colonialism or Indigenous issues or communities in their oral history or participatory photography, the experiences of racism, xenophobia, and heteronormativity are implicitly informed by the continuing legacy of white and heteronormative settler colonialism. Starting from Mario's and John's oral histories and participatory photography, a link can be made to what they experienced and the layers of memory, structural power, and discourse that constructs settler colonial gendered, racial, classed, and sexualized hierarchies in Davie Village and Vancouver. In my attempt to reveal these links and to insert my own analysis of Mario's and John's words, I intend to interrogate settler colonialism. It is up to forced migration researchers to look critically at the layers of history and power structures that shape refugee settlement and experiences of belonging. By doing so we may gain the opportunity to delve deeper into colonial structures that not only marginalize refugees but also deny Indigenous sovereignty. Instead of seeing these issues as separate or even

<sup>75</sup> Harsha Walia, "Decolonizing Together: Moving beyond a Politics of Solidarity toward a Practice of Decolonization," *Briarpatch* 1 (2012) (<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/decolonizing-together>).

as conflicting, forced migration researchers and activists should work towards points of coalition and solidarity with Indigenous communities.

Mario's and John's stories reveal the complex web of histories and discourses that many non-white and low-income queer refugees encounter when coming to Canada. In order to further illuminate (and hopefully challenge) ongoing racialized, gendered, and sexualized settler inequality, it is important to understand the experiences of LGBTQ refugees. Even in the midst of marginalization there is celebration and hope: along with feelings of isolation and being out of place, there are also acts of resistance and signs of hope. These narratives of hope and resistance exist in the temporal present as well as in the imagined future. Mario's ongoing work to create a visible presence and network for the Hispanic and Latinx LGBTQ community is a way to challenge erasure and to create a larger community for Latinx queer migrants. Mario is creating a place for himself – not only in Davie Village but also within the larger city – by showing and promoting the existence of Latinx and Hispanic queers. John's photographs and story are an act of defiance against the very forces that are trying to marginalize him. Waiting for his ship to come in is an act of resistance, as it is a way for him to maintain hope in the face of uncertainty. Not an easy task.

In exploring belonging and not belonging, or being in or out of place, oral history and participatory photography are a way to capture ephemeral and transitory narratives of migration, place-making, and attachment. The collected oral histories and participatory photography offer a snapshot in time for Mario and John. In many ways, Mario and John were/are in transit as they locate themselves in Vancouver and navigate a web of social and structural relationships. It would be interesting to see how their narratives may change through the years. Will John's ship come in? Will Mario further create the sense of home and community he needs in order to feel a sense of belonging? Where will they end up living? The answer to these questions may be very different from what was captured in this research. What Mario's and John's narratives reveal is the constant renegotiation and reconstruction of their sense of being in and out of place. It is in this dynamic fluidity of affect, memory, and place that refugees form their senses of home and belonging. By using participatory photography and oral history, one can flow in a particular moment of time and place, knowing that the journey never ends.